Influence of the senses

Alan Goode

If yoga is “the stilling of the fluctuation in the consciousness,” then practice is the movement of consciousness from a state of distraction, through observation, to reach a state of attention.

Practice can be seen in light of this definition as an attempt to still the wandering mind by returning the mind to a focal point, but this amounts to a concentration technique where one impression replaces another. Via this technique, the wandering mind is stilled by bringing it to a point of focus. In other words, according to this interpretation, yoga only exists when the mind is concentrated.

In another interpretation, practice is the act of *observing* our interaction with sense objects, and becomes a study of the way the mind interacts with things whether they be asanas or aspects of our daily life. It is a study of our perception, whereby it is not essential to stop the mind from moving, but to study ***why*** and ***how*** it moves, and its patterns and habits. For me this requires a level of intimacy with the mind, which is not an act of overpowering it but engaging its workings, and gradually releasing it from its habitual wandering through the power of recognition.

Patanjali explains that this wandering of the mind takes place when we attribute qualities to an object - a common experience for us all. We think the new car will make us happy or solve all our transport problems. Desire for the object is generated by what we think the object will do for us. As we come to know the object more intimately, our relationship to it changes to one of clearer perception and clarity. The object either loses its influence over us (loses its allure) or becomes enriched through that process of knowing it. It’s the same in yoga.

The structure of a practice provides an ideal form to study the way we interact with objects. In the case of asana we do this in the moment of action. We enter a dynamic moment of action and to study this interaction of mind and senses with the object. Urges to go deeper, adjust, retract, avoid are present. Desire and aversion exist in a very immediate form. Stepping beyond our urges is necessary. It is in this state of doing that a pure attention is cultivated – a distinction that Iyengar refers to as ‘moment and movement’:

> Moment is subjective and movement is objective. Patanjali explains that the moment is the present and the present is the eternal now: it is timeless, and real. When it slips from attention, it becomes movement, and movement is time. As moment rolls into movement, the past and the future appear and the moment disappears. Going with the movements of moments is the future; retraction of this is the past. The moment alone is the present. Past and future create changes; the present is changeless. The fluctuations of consciousness into the past and future create time. If the mind, intelligence and consciousness are kept steady, and aware of moments without being caught in movements, the state of no-mind and no-time is experienced. This state is amanaskatva. The seer sees directly, independent of the

workings of the mind. The yogi becomes the mind's master, not its slave. He lives in a mind-free, time-free state. This is known as vivekajajnanam: vivid, true knowledge. [1]

This attempt to exist in the moment requires a presence of mind born out of regular, sustained practice that has a depth of concentration and stamina to uncover the intimacy mentioned before. The result of entering the moment in practice is that the sense of time dissolves. Have you ever been in a class or a practice, totally absorbed, where the sense of time doesn't exist only to suddenly have yourself return to the experience of the world of time.

The normal state of mind is to engage (look outward) through the senses. The mind is fed by the senses (eyes, ears, tongue, nose and skin) and has no choice in what the senses feed it. Through its training it has no discrimination in the choice of inputs. The senses are like antennae – they pick up whatever is in our surroundings and in doing so, draw our attention towards the world and into interaction with, and desire for, objects seen and experienced. It is through the senses that we lose ourselves. Eyes see, ears hear, etc without our choice but we in turn are carried off through these faculties. I often have the image of my attention spilling out through my eyes as I interact with the world around me.

"At other times, the seer identifies with the fluctuating consciousness."

When the seer identifies with consciousness or with the objects seen, he unites with them and forgets his grandeur. The natural tendency of consciousness is to become involved with the object seen, draw the seer towards it, and move the seer to identify with it. Then the seer becomes engrossed in the object. This becomes the seed for diversification of the intelligence, and makes the seer forget his own radiant awareness.
When the soul does not radiate its own glory, it is a sign that the thinking faculty has manifested itself in place of the soul.
The imprint of objects is transmitted to citta through the senses of perception. Citta absorbs these sensory impressions and becomes coloured and modified by them. Objects act as provender for the grazing citta, which is attracted to them by its appetite. Citta projects itself, taking on the form of the objects in order to possess them. Thus it becomes enveloped by thoughts of the object, with the result that the soul is obscured. In this way, citta becomes murky and causes changes in behaviour and mood as it identifies itself with things seen. (See III.36.)
Although in reality citta is a formless entity, it can be helpful to visualize it in order to grasp its functions and limitations. Let us imagine it to be like an optical lens, containing no light of its own, but placed directly above a source of pure light, the soul. One face of the lens, facing inwards towards the light, remains clean. We are normally aware of this internal facet of citta only when it speaks to us with the voice of conscience.
In daily life, however, we are very much aware of the upper surface of the lens, facing outwards to the world and linked to it by the senses and mind. This surface serves both as a sense, and as a content of consciousness, along with ego and intelligence. Worked upon by the desires and fears of turbulent worldly life, it becomes cloudy, opaque, even dirty and scarred, and prevents the soul's light from shining through it. Lacking inner illumination, it seeks all the more avidly the artificial lights of conditioned existence. The whole technique of yoga, its practice and restraint, is aimed at dissociating consciousness from its identification with the phenomenal world, at restraining the senses by which it is ensnared, and at cleansing and purifying the lens of citta, until it transmits wholly and only the light of the soul. [2]

[1] BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 34
[2] BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 49

As mentioned above, the image of a lens is often used to describe this process, where the senses are orientated to the world of external objects and references so that the inner world feels unfamiliar, frightening and disconnected from our daily lives. We are more at home deriving our sense of self from our society and other people's perception of us. Patanjali describes a method to alter this situation. The senses are the avenue through which imprints are transmitted to the mind and the avenue through which the mind feeds itself. Although the senses capture us into a sensory world they can be used to understand and remedy the situation. This is a gradual, developmental process of absorbing the senses in the internal world (called Pratyahara).

Inverting the senses is achieved through the ***Indriyas*** where the senses are gradually weaned away from sense objects and directed inwards. On this level, a practice is an attempt to clarify our perception of the world and of our self. The Indriyas are divided into 2 groups:

Karmandriyas (organs of action). These include the arms, legs, digestion, excretion and reproduction.

Jnanendriyas (senses of perception). These include sound, taste, touch and smell. (The mind is considered to be the eleventh sense.)

"Renunciation is the practice of detachment from desires."
When non-attachment and detachment are learned there is no craving for objects seen or unseen, words heard or unheard. Then the seer remains unmoved by temptations. This is the sign of mastery in the art of renunciation.
Non-attachment and detachment must be learned through willpower. They consist of learning to be free from cravings, not only for worldly, but so heavenly pleasures. Citta is taught to be unmoved by thoughts of desire and passion, and to remain in a state of pure consciousness, devoid of all objects and free even from the qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas.
The mind is considered by the sages to be the eleventh sense. The eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin are the five senses of perception. The arms, legs, mouth, generative and excretory organs are the five organs of action. These are the external senses: the mind is an internal sense organ.

There are five stages in vairagya.

1 Disengaging the senses from enjoyment of their objects, and controlling them, is yatamana. As it is not possible to control all the senses at once, one should attempt to control them one by one to achieve mastery over them all.

2 By thoughtful control, one burns away the desires which obstruct citta's movement towards the soul. This is vyatireka.

3 When the five senses of perception and five organs of action have been weaned away from contact with objects, the feeblest desires remain in a causal state and are felt only in the mind: this is ekendriya. The mind wants to play a dual role: to fulfill the desires of the senses, and also to experience Self-Realization. Once the senses have been silenced, the mind moves with one-pointed effort towards Soul Realization.

4 Vasikara is attained when one has overcome all longings, and developed indifference to all types of attachment, non-attachment and detachment. All eleven senses have been subjugated.

> 5 From these develops paravairagya, the highest form of renunciation: it is free from the qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas. On attaining this state, the sadhaka ceases to be concerned with himself, or with others who remain caught in the web of pleasure.[3]

Five states of renunciation are mentioned above. In a previous article on the ***Twin Pillars of Yoga*** I examined the twin paths of practice (abhaysha) and renunciation or restraint (vairagya). Abhaysha is the long uninterrupted enquiry into a subject. Abhaysha requires application and effort to overcome the internal obstacles each of us has within us. In sutra 1:15, the practice of restraint is an act of gradually disengaging the senses from external objects, redirecting and internalizing them. In a practice of asana we do this by absorbing the movements fully and internalizing them so that the asana is done with a physical, mental, and spiritual attitude. Initially a struggle ensues between the desire of the senses to look outward (to roam), and the need to be fully present to the asana. The habit of mind is to search outside itself and to become lost in a world of stimulus.
In each asana the Karmandriyas -organs of action (arms, legs, digestion, excretion and reproduction) -participate. These are the movements of the body and its workings. Take a simple standing pose – Utthita Trikonasana for example. The arms and legs, intestines and secretions of the body are all affected by this movement, and are defined and refined over time until the asana is explored and understood. The asana is also a process of immersion for the senses. In other words, the organs of action lead us to acknowledge the senses of perception and their influence in the asana.

Each asana is a delicate interaction of the senses. The Jnanandriyas (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell) must absorb the asana. Due to their orientation, when the senses encounter a stimulus they trigger, become agitated and inflame the mind. Not allowing the senses to trigger is the beginning of a more refined development of practice. For this reason facial expression is removed from asana work with teachers often asking students to “soften the eyes” or “relax the jaw,” as clear references to make the student aware of their influence in the asanas. Keep the mind in a steady point of focus through asana. All practice becomes a fine balance between purpose and stillness - the doing and undoing in asana.

Each time we practice we are involved in an act of internalizing the senses. This is often experienced as a loss of time. The dissolution of time is an act of disengaging the senses from seen objects and immersing them in moment-to-moment experience. Iyengar again:

> **“Time”**
>
> Yogic discipline eradicates ignorance, avidya. When illusion is banished, time becomes timeless. Though time is a continuum, it has three movements: past, present and future. Past and future are woven into the present and the present is timeless and eternal. Like the potter's wheel, the present -the moment - rolls into movement as day and night, creating the impression that time is moving. The mind, observing the movement of time, differentiates it as past, present and future. Because of this, the perception of objects varies at different times.

[3] LOYS, p. 60

> Though the permanent characters of time, the object and the subject remain in their own entities, the mind sees them differently according to the development of its intelligence, and creates disparity between observation and reflection. Hence, actions and fulfillments differ. The yogi is alert to, and aware of, the present, and lives in the present, using past experience only as a platform for the present. This brings changelessness in the attitude of the mind towards the object seen.[4]

When we follow the path inward from the external, to internalization through the karmandriyas and the Jnanendriyas the practice becomes sensitized rather than driven or forced. This signifies a quality I refer to as ***presence*** in the asana, where you dwell in the asana in the moment and time does not seem to exist. It's as if there is a pause or spacious quality in your actions. This is directly attributable to your interaction with the asana, and to the way the senses interact. At first we learn by using focus and willpower to develop a concentrated state of practice. The asana is defined, analyzed, refined and evolved. Our purposeful practice transforms the wandering mind to a state of focus. The capacity to concentrate deeply is developed and yet yoga can be even more than this. In the following passage from Iyengar's commentary he observes that when we replace one set of inputs (external) with another (internal), our consciousness will always trigger. To go further, he says, we must enter the timeless state *between* impressions and exist there in the moment of our doing. This method exists in the ashtanga vinyasa practice of Patabi Jois where students follow a sequence of jumps, with the emphasis on flow and breath in order to bring the student into the moment. Iyengar's method on the other hand, with its emphasis on sustaining the asana is, in my opinion, an enquiry into the *pause.* Iyengar examines this in the following commentary:

> **"Study the silent moments between rising and restraining subliminal impressions is the transformation of consciousness towards restraint (nirodha parinamah)."**
>
> The central thread of Patanjali's philosophy is the relationship between the Self, purusa, and nature, prakrti. We are born into nature, and without it nothing would move, nothing would change, nothing could happen. We seek to free ourselves from nature in order to transcend it, to achieve lasting freedom. *Sensory involvement leads to attachment, desire, frustration and anger. These bring disorientation, and the eventual decay of our true intelligence. Through the combined techniques and resources of yama, niyama, asana, pranayama and pratyahara we learn control. These are all external means of restraining consciousness, whether we focus on God, or the breath, or in an asana by learning to direct and diffuse consciousness. All this learning develops in the relationship between subject and object. It is comparatively simple because it is a relative, dual process. But how can subject work on subject, consciousness on consciousness? How, in other words, can one's eyes see one's own eyes? In III.9-15 Patanjali shows the way...*
> One may well ask why one ought to do this. III.13-14 answer this question and enable one to identify, within one's consciousness, the subtle properties of nature, to discriminate between them, and to distinguish between that which undergoes the stresses and changes of time and that which is immutable and permanent. In so doing we gain from the inner quest the same freedom from nature that we have struggled to achieve in the external. The freedom we gain from the tyranny of time, from the illusion that is absolute, is especially significant. Cutting our ties to sense objects within our consciousness carries immensely more weight than any severance from outside objects; if this were not so, a prisoner in solitary confinement would be halfway to being a yogi. Through the inner quest, the inner aspects of desire, attraction and aversion are brought to an end...
> As long as one impression is replaced by a counter-impression, consciousness rises up against it. This state is called vyutthana citta, or vyutthana samskara (rising impressions). Restraining the rising waves of

[4] BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 37

consciousness and overcoming these impressions is nirodha citta or nirodha samskara. The precious psychological moments of intermission (nirodhaksana) where there is stillness and silence are to be prolonged into extra-chronological moments of consciousness, without beginning or end….
The mind wavers like the waves of the sea, and we must make efforts to direct its attention to a chosen thought or object. In this process we often lose awareness on account of suppression and distraction. Having understood these silent intervals, we have to prolong them, as we prolong breath retention, so that there is no room for generation or restraint of thoughts…
Consciousness has three dharmic characteristics; to wander, to be restrained and to remain silent. The silent state must be transformed into a dynamic but single state of awareness. Patanijali warns that in restraint old impressions may re-emerge: the sadhaka must train to react instantly to such appearances and cut them off at their source. Each act of restraint re-establishes a state of restfulness. This is dharma parinama. When a serene flow of tranquility is maintained without interruption then samadhi parinama and laksana parinama begin. During this phase the sadhaka may become trapped in a spiritual desert (see 1.18). At this point he must persevere to reach oneness with the soul and abide in that state (avastha parinama) everlastingly. This final goal is reached through ekagrata parinama. (See 1.20.). [5]

Iyengar's teaching techniques take on a poignant quality. His direct style (sometimes seen as aggressive) can be interpreted as an attempt to force students into the *moment* and to keep them there. Whether these methods are appropriate in today's world or whether they can by interpreted as abusive is hotly debated, however, his insistence on complete engagement sits within the context of his interpretation of Patanjali's work. In watching his practice over many years, one thing has constantly struck me – he does not act from the external form but searches the stable point at the center of the pose and extends that stable point through *presence*.

If I were to describe a sequence of development of practice based on the themes of this article, I would view it thus:

- As a beginner we are drawn by the teacher to experience the asanas through the technical alignments and coordinations.
- As we develop in our understanding, we proceed to explore and redefine our understanding. We become intimate with our practice and competent in the poses. Focus and will develops.
- Having developed a level of competency, we should then begin to search out the *moment* in practice. This moment exists in any asana where focus and attention are necessary skills but ultimately not the end purpose.

In summary, the influence of the senses in the development of a practice cannot be overlooked or downplayed. The senses do not merely transmit the experience but shape it also. Patanjali not only acknowledges the influence of the senses, but directly sets out a method to uncover and transcend their part in our perception of our world.

[5] BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 176-179